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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MUSCAT 000587

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SUBJECT: OMANI MEDIA CHALLENGED BY CYCLONE REPORTING

REF: MUSCAT 581

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Sensitive but unclassified; please handle accordingly.

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) The profound limitations of Oman's media, public and private, have been thrown into high relief by the challenge of reporting the approach, onset, and aftermath of Cyclone Gonu between June 4 and the present. While basic information regarding the storm's arrival was disseminated on a relatively timely basis, the near-total lack of reporting capacity, ingrained cautiousness regarding all aspects of officialdom, and almost comically optimistic slant to both print and broadcast content has ensured that misinformation and rumor flourish. Of concern to Post is the resulting inability to disseminate emergency information to American citizens via mass media on a timely basis. END SUMMARY.

ALL NEWS IS GOOD NEWS

12. (SBU) The approach of Cyclone Gonu was reported on state television and radio in general terms beginning Monday, June 4. State and private papers on Tuesday, June 5 carried prominent storm-related reporting, although little of the kind of precautionary warnings and specific advice one might expect with a potential Category Five cyclone approaching. As the cyclone hit Muscat on Wednesday and Thursday (June 6 and 7), media access for most Omanis was interrupted, with newspapers suspending publication or receiving extremely limited distribution (Embassy officers saw the first copies of the Wednesday, June 6 papers, for example, when they were delivered on Sunday, June 10) and the temporary cessation of local television transmission. During the storm, Arabic-language radio alternated between calls from listeners describing the situation in various areas of the country, blandly encouraging statements from government entities, and music. English-language radio relied almost entirely on uninterrupted pop music, with minimal commentary or reporting.

13. (SBU) Oman TV delivered its most valuable service in the immediate aftermath of the storm on the evening of Wednesday, June 6 and morning of Thursday, June 7. While still providing limited actual news coverage, the station did broadcast extensive footage of those areas of Muscat then reachable by station personnel, in an apparent attempt to minimize the number of people out looking at storm damage for themselves.

¶4. (SBU) Initially, neither TV nor radio news provided significant concrete information. Neither Arabic nor English TV news, for example, reported the shutdown of the municipal water system until the morning of Saturday, June 9, more than eighteen hours after taps ran dry. Media messages were highly inconsistent, with new information being incorporated piecemeal or not at all. A comparatively detailed interview on the status of water service was broadcast a single time on Arabic radio at noon on June 9, for example, but its information never fully woven into subsequent reporting. English and other non-Arabic transmissions for the country's 600,000-plus non-Arabic speakers were practically non-existent. As of June 10, there was still no media information on water quality or the continuing need for conservation measures in those areas in which service was restored. The situation was best summed up by one frustrated blogger, who posted a comic list of post-storm statistics that ended "number of times authorities cursed for lack of information on the radio = 10,222,576,127,441."

SITUATION NORMAL...

¶5. (SBU) All outlets relied heavily on respectful interviews with a limited number of officials, principally the Inspector General and the Director of Public Relations of the Royal Oman Police (both of whom were relatively effective, if not forthcoming with detail). Also prominently featured were recitations of official statements - lists of meetings held to discuss the crisis and general information on measures taken (that water-distribution stations had been set up, for example, although for the first twelve hours there was no consistent mention of where). Oman TV's news on Saturday, June 9 returned to an almost surreal "normalcy" by leading broadcasts, as state news does daily, with reports on recent diplomatic messages received and sent by the Sultan and by turning after only a few minutes to international news.

¶6. (SBU) Prominent in all coverage beginning June 9 were themes of self-reliance and community cooperation. TV updates were titled "Volunteering and Coming together", with callers reporting on work they were carrying out at sites around the city. Anchors and

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commentators reinforced the need for Omanis to show that the Sultanate could rebuild on its own, and callers praised efforts under way and the display of resolve being shown by Omanis. Muscat's new private radio station, Hala-FM, proved unexpectedly responsive to local needs, adding caller segments and comparatively useful updates to its all-music format.

"PAY NO ATTENTION TO THAT MAN BEHIND THE CURTAIN!"

¶7. (SBU) The display of unity and optimism was not, however, without occasional glitches. Sources report that Minister of Commerce and Industry Maqbool bin Ali Sultan was briefly caught off guard on live television when, after his announcement that supplies including rice were available on the local market, he was asked "what use is rice when there is no water?" In an unprecedented moment on June 9, a caller to Oman TV showed surprising nerve in asking why nothing had yet been heard from the Sultan. [NOTE: as of June 11, not only the Sultan, but the entire royal family and the cabinet have been notably silent and invisible since the advent of Gonu. END NOTE.] A radio caller also pushed the boundaries of acceptable local public discourse in complaining about the Muscat-centric coverage that has provided relatively little information on other hard-hit areas. Even the somnolent English-language daily "Oman Tribune" decried the decision not to seek international assistance (Reftel) in an online editorial (headlined "We Shall Overcome") that said, "We wonder why we should not ask for help when we need it."

¶8. (SBU) By June 10, likely at least in part as a result of acerbic online commentary, some government statements had taken on a defensive tone, asking for patience and that officials "be given the

benefit of the doubt" in regard to the effectiveness of relief and recovery efforts. Embassy contacts report increasing notice being taken of the lack of comprehensive coverage of the storm's aftermath, especially of potentially inflammatory issues such as alleged incidents of looting, as well as of detail on basic safety and public health issues such as the large areas of standing water in some neighborhoods and the lack of trash pickup. Early coverage on June 11 remained inconsistent, with banner headlines such as "Relentless efforts start bearing fruit" and "Ministry of Health handled situation efficiently" contrasting with smaller stories such as "Watch out for waterborne diseases".

HURDLES IN GETTING OUT THE WORD

19. (SBU) On Sunday, June 10, the two English-language papers that resumed publication, the state-owned "Oman Observer" and the private "Tribune", carried an Embassy statement on consular services and information for American citizens. Both agreed to waive the usual requirement that Embassy releases first be cleared via dipnote. National English-language radio, however, carried only a fragment of the statement, removing any language that made it specific to Americans or that included Embassy information. [COMMENT: Oman's media bureaucracy creates serious obstacles to rapidly disseminating consular information by either TV or radio, a serious public diplomacy concern that Post will attempt to address as part of our post-Gonu response. END COMMENT.]

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